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“Kresy” as a Specific Type of Borderland – It's Origin and Characteristics

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Abstract

In the history of Poland, which since the end of the 14th century was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, there was a specific form of vast, remote, multi-cultural and unstabilized borderland called 'kresy'. It can be roughly translated as: confines of the state, extreme border zones or far outskirts. Regular borderland usually is a contact zone of the ecumenes of two political nations, that is, the ones having their own nation states. Such areas are bicultural, yet the two national communities can intermingle: bilingualism is common and sometimes both cultures converge. On the other hand, the term kresy designates an area situated outside the nucleus of the state, incorporated by way of conquest, succession, personal union, etc. Consequently, it is a multicultural territory of more complex ethnic, political and social conditions. In America and Russia the pioneer's mentality can be ascribed to the term: there, a peculiar borderland law was put in place, romantic ethos of the frontier people was spread around. In Poland such an area was related to the advance guard of Christianity, in America it was the ethos of the Wild West conquerors. Similar characteristics one can observe in the Balkans within the Ottoman Empire, Slovakia and Croatia within the Kingdom of Hungary, Siberia, Caucasus and Central Asia within the Russian Empire. Nowadays it is the case of Tibet and Xinkjang in China, Kurdistan in Turkey, Amazonia in Brazil, etc.

Keywords: political geography, kresy, frontier, borderland, Poland.

Introduction

In the history of Poland, which since the end of the 14th century was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, there was a specific form of vast, remote, multicultural and unstabilized borderland called 'kresy'. It covered a somewhat wild area in the southeastern frontier of the united state that extends from present-day Ukraine up to the Black Sea Lowland. Its southernmost extremes were named at that time Wild-Fields, or Wild Steppes. The Kresy existed until the partition of the 'commonwealth of the Two Nations' at the end of the 18th century but the term has been in use in Polish historical and political literature to the present.

This Polish word has no exact equivalent in other languages. It can be roughly translated as: confines of the state, extreme border zones or far outskirts. It seems, however, that 'kresy' was not a uniquely Polish phenomenon, so this term should be used in more universal sense of the word. It can refer to many former and contemporary extensive interstate borderlands situated far from the core area of a given state, having somewhat of a complex character and, often, unstabilized frontiers.

Nevertheless, not every borderland may be called kresy. There is a clear distinction between a 'regular' borderland and a kresy. Regular borderland usually is a contact zone of the ecumenes of two political nations, that is, the ones having their own nation states. Such areas are bicultural, yet the two national communities can intermingle: bilingualism is common and sometimes both cultures converge. On the other hand, the term kresy designates an area situated outside the nucleus of the state, incorporated by way of conquest, succession, personal union, etc. Consequently, it is a multicultural territory of more complex ethnic, political and social conditions. A borderland between two developed countries is not necessarily a 'shadow zone' in respect to the economy: several borderlands are areas of a high economic standing. On the contrary, the notion of kresy implies its peripheral character in relation to both political territory and national economy.

Kresy is thus a notion which comprises on the one hand the politico-geographical position of some areas and on the other hand their political, social, economic and, first of all, cultural features. The present paper attempts a broader and universal approach to the phenomenon of kresy. It seeks to explain its origin and summarise the characteristics of these peculiar areas.

At present there is no universal term in the literature assigned to the notion of *kresy*, although the English words *borderland* and *frontier* (in American usage) as well as the Russian *rubież* approximate its significance. Lack of an appropriate term which would convey the idea of these specific areas makes the politico-geographical nomenclature incomplete. It seems to be desirable that the word *kresy* should be attributed such universal meaning, that is exceeding the Polish context. Actually, in the history of many countries there were such peculiar lands in the peripheries of state territories which due to their complex geographical, political, social, economic and cultural characteristics could not be simply termed a borderland.

So *kresy* exists in different parts of the world as an objective reality. If a commonly accepted, international term for it has not been coined yet, it seems reasonable to ascribe such general denotation to the Polish word *kresy*, and moreover because the former Polish *Kresy* is the best example of this kind of land, at least in Europe.

Kresy in the Light of Core-and-Periphery Theory

The phenomenon of *kresy* is associated with terms of the core-and-periphery theory, well-known in the political geography. The concept of territorial expansion of states was outlined at the end of the 19th century by F. Ratzel (1896), then developed in the 1930s by D. S. Whittlesey (1939) and subsequently sophisticated analyses succeeding by succeeding generations of political geographers including, the author of (Koter 1993b, 1994, 1995a).

The term *core area* is commonly used in the English political geographic literature (see Hartshorn 1950/1971, Prescott 1975, Glassner and de Blij 1989, Taylor 1989). In French literature it is rendered as *noyau-central* (Sanguin 1977) and in German as *Kernraum* (Ante 1981). This term is used to describe former and contemporary areas of political domination, areas of strong national and cultural consciousness, and areas excelling in the field of economy and innovation. From these areas the political, economic and cultural domination of the state starts spreading and covers larger and larger territories: at first neighbouring and ethnically close regions and later more remote areas, sometimes of different ethnicity. Such expansion from the core area towards peripheries occurred in the history of many states, e.g., France, Poland, Russia.

The core areas hardly ever remain isolated. Usually they are accompanied by more or less distant sub-cores, that is secondary centres of a like nature.

Together they cover the greater part of the national territory and form, according to Whittlesey (1935), the *ecumene* of a nation or state. As Whittlesey has expressed it 'this is a part of a state marked by the highest population density, most developed population and most developed transportation network' (*ibid.*, pp. 453-454). I. H. Zaidi (1966) has called this part of the country the *effective state area*. Out of this territory there are peripheries where the effectiveness of the state diminish. Some of these peripheries are ethnically close to the core area and thus, despite their underdevelopment, they are indeed a part of the national *ecumene*. Otherwise the remote and ethnically distinct regions maintain their separate character.

As was emphasised by R. Muir (1975) the main objective of any government is to establish an effective control over the whole of the state territory. However, in some areas the authorities fail to exert such control and their integration is hampered by either geographical obstacles, or unfavourable attitude of local population, or recency of colonisation. These unintegrated regions either remain completely out of control of the state or are subject to rivalry between internal and external forces. That is what actually best corresponds to the notion of *kresy*.

Muir has added that the territories outside the effective state area are marked by a lack of regular state services, domination of military forms of political life, unsafety and instability, and quite common banditry. The network of communities resembles more a set of atomised defensive posts than a normal dispersed settlement. Although there are some enclaves of state power within such land, nevertheless the control they exercise over colonised areas is hardly effective. According to Muir such extraecumenical territories are more typical of developing countries than the developed ones and they symptomatize an early stage of expansion of the effective state power (*ibid.*, pp. 41-43).

At the time of formation of first modern states based on so-called political nations, particular national *ecumenes* usually were separated by vast areas sparsely populated by peoples deprived of political organisation. These zones constituted a potential *kresy* for all contiguous countries. Their eventual political affiliation depended on dynamism and the power of particular states and nations. Those countries which restrained their activity to the defence of national *ecumene* have never formed a *kresy*.

Kresy is a dynamic phenomenon. Despite the popular understanding of the word *kresy*, it does not imply a limitation of territorial expansion of a state. To the contrary, *kresy* comprehends expansiveness, because as an area without strict confines, it is an undefined border zone which could be enlarge ac-

ording to needs and possibilities. The dynamic character of kresy is best rendered by the English word *frontier* understood as 'something what is at front of us' – a land that should be reached, explored, conquered, peopled and subjected.

Origin and characteristic of the Polish Kresy

The state which halts its territorial expansion and assumes a defensive attitude has no longer a real frontier, that is an open kresy. Its fringe becomes a defensive line to be finally transformed into a more or less definite border line, which is called in American English a boundary. At this stage the word kresy acquires a slightly different meaning: it means the adjacent land beyond the boundary, that is, a far borderland with specific political, economic, social, cultural and legal conditions which distinguish it from the rest of the country.

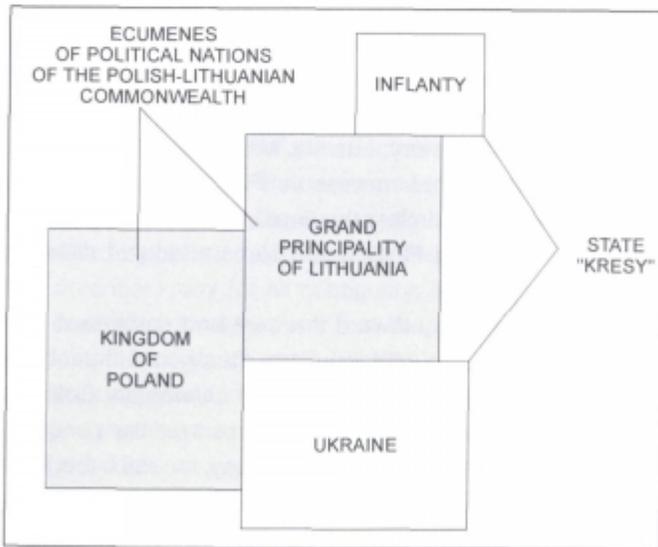
The dynamic nature of kresy means that in different historical periods different regions played the role of kresy. In the 10th century, at the dawn of Polish statehood, it was the tribal state of Polanie which integrated the contiguous lands. It actually became the national core area of a future Polish state which was reflected by the name of this central province called Wielkopolska (Polonia Maior or Great Poland). The tribe of Polanie must have considered all newly incorporated provinces as kresy: despite ethnic kinship the regions of Silesia, Pomerania, Mazovia and Małopolska were at that time unfamiliar and unstable. Gradually a political and national integration of these subcores with the Wielkopolska core was achieved and thus they became parts of the effective state area and of the Polish national ecumene. Under Bolesław the Brave, at the beginning of the 11th century, Lusatia, Milsko and Slovakia became temporarily a new kresy. Under his successors Poland practically had no kresy until the 14th century when Kazimierz the Great incorporated in to the Kingdom of Poland the territory of Red Ruthenia, a remote land of different ethnicity (figure 1).

Further expansion of kresy toward the east and south-east took place in the 15th century after the union with the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The united state had then two political nations: Polish and Lithuanian. Both nations had their own national ecumenes and exerted control over the conquered Ruthenian lands which actually played the role of kresy. In 1561 the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth annexed Inflanty or Livland (part of contemporary Latvia and Estonia) which became another common kresy (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Scheme of the Territorial Structure of Medieval Poland



Figure 2. Scheme of the Territorial Structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (15th-18th Centuries)



The Polish core, together with surrounding sub-cores, arose in the river-basins of Vistula and Oder while the core of the Lithuanian state is to be found in the Neman basin. The conquest of kresy involved passing beyond the watersheds and the encroachment on basins of other rivers: Dniester, Boh, Dnieper and Dvina.

The term kresy was forged in the middle of the 19th century by Wincenty Pol, a renowned geographer, who used it to denote 'a distant borderland living at its own pace' and as a term for territories that formerly belonged to the Polish state. He was the first to use the word kresy not only in its spatial meaning with reference to former Polish borderlands 'in far Ukraine' but also in its universal sense concerning all areas of this kind.

What characteristics accounted for the politico-geographical specificity of Polish Kresy and what distinguished it from other parts of the country? First of all it was a peripheral area in relation to centres of power, economy and culture. The land was wild, hardly accessible and thinly populated which resulted in its general slowness for settlement, especially in the Wild Steppes – the farthest peripheries.

New state borders in the southeast were, because of their shape and length, susceptible to raids by dangerous neighbours: Crimean Tatars, Wallachians and Turks. The western border at that time had already the form of a definite line, whereas the eastern and southeastern borders were still vaguely defined. They ran somewhere in steppes without being precisely demarcated.

Because of constant danger, the borderland population had to learn to fight and be always ready for defence. This led to militarization, particularly in the extreme peripheries. It was based on a system of forts and castles encircled by boyar settlements. The boyars were landlords obliged to maintain the fortresses and man them in case of emergency.

New settlement in these lands proceeded very slowly. In the south there were merely a few towns surrounded by wasteland. Therefore the southern border remained open and poorly defined till the 17th century. In such conditions the territorial defence was inefficient and had to be replaced by permanent mercenary troops.

In order to people the devastated territory of Ukraine, the kings of Poland organised distribution of vast uninhabited lands as a tribute for prominent citizens in recognition of their services. The beneficiaries who settled in their estates newcomers from Poland and other countries which caused significant changes in the ethnic composition of Ukraine and contributed to multiculturalism in this area.

Kresy in Other Parts of the World

In 'old' Europe where nation states have existed for centuries, just a few countries had borderlands with origins and character like the Polish Kresy. Classic examples were to be found in the German Empire in the early Middle Ages. From the 10 - 12th century the emperors established in conquered Slavic lands special border provinces called marches governed by margraves. After being colonized by German settlers, some marches transformed into autonomous states: for example, the March of Meissen became Saxony and Northern and New March became Brandenburg. It should be noted that no march was founded in the western periphery of the empire because the boundary with powerful France was demarcated with no space for a kresy.

In the same way, Austria had definite boundaries with German and Italian states, but acquired kresy in Slavic countries: in Bohemia, Silesia and the Balkans. Hungary also had a boundary with Austria and kresy in Slovakia, Transcarpathia, Transylvania and Croatia. Much the same was true in Russia: its western outskirts, considered ethnically proper to Russia, were not perceived as kresy. Kresy were found in regions of different ethnicities: the Black Sea Lowlands, Siberia, Caucasus, Kazakhstan and Central Asia. In like manner, Sweden had fixed borders with Denmark and Norway, but to the north there were areas open for expansion. Therefore, wild Lapland and wooded Finland became kresy for Sweden.

Some interesting examples of kresy exist also in other continents, particularly in Asia. Kurdistan in the Near East is an arid, mountainous land divided between Turkey, Iran and Iraq and is inhabited by Kurds – Indo-European people distinct from Turks and Arabs. The revolted Kurds observe their own clan law. Allochthonous Arabs and Turks stick to towns which are centres of limited civil power and total military control. Another example of kresy is found in the region of Djezira, the northeastern borderland of Syria between Turkey and Iraq. The region is a real melting pot of cultures, languages and religions and the Arabs prevailing in Syria call in question its affiliation to the state.

There are kresy in other parts of Asia as well, e.g. northern provinces of Burma, northern Thailand and North-Western Border Province in Pakistan. China has always had some kresy in lands beyond the range of permanent Chinese settlement. According to traditional sinocentric concepts the territories inhabited by barbarian or semi-barbarian peoples such as Mongols, Uygurs, Manchus, Tibetans, etc, were seen as the extremities of civilization, that is actually kresy. Nowadays, the region of Xingjang in west China is a perfect

example of kresy. Etymologically, the region's name means 'new frontier' which reflects well its geographical, political, social and cultural specificity.

In Africa kresy occurs only in sub-Saharan Arabic countries: in the southern parts of Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt inhabited by nomadic Bedouins and Tuaregs, as well as in southern Sudan peopled by black animistic and Christian tribes who revolted against Muslim majority. In trans-saharan Africa where there are no firm nation states, kresy can not be expected to exist.

In South America there are some forms of kresy in almost all countries. In Brazil, Peru and Venezuela, it is the Amazonian rainforest sparsely populated by small Indian tribes. Argentina has its kresy in desert Patagonia where only very few native peoples have survived.

In North America a kresy is in subarctic Canada, in the Northwest Territory inhabited by Indians and Eskimos. The frontier character of the region appears in its status of territory and also in the planned establishment of Nunavut – a autonomous national territory of Inuits in the eastern part of the region.

However, the most classic and best known example of kresy occurred in the United States. This country had long established boundary with Canada to the north whereas to the west there were a vast, open spaces inviting one to conquer and settle. There was the famous Wild West composed of impenetrable forests, infinite prairies, wild mountains and deserts. It was actually the dynamic American frontier – something in front of us, an undefined border zone that should be conquered in order to develop new lands and mark another temporary frontier.

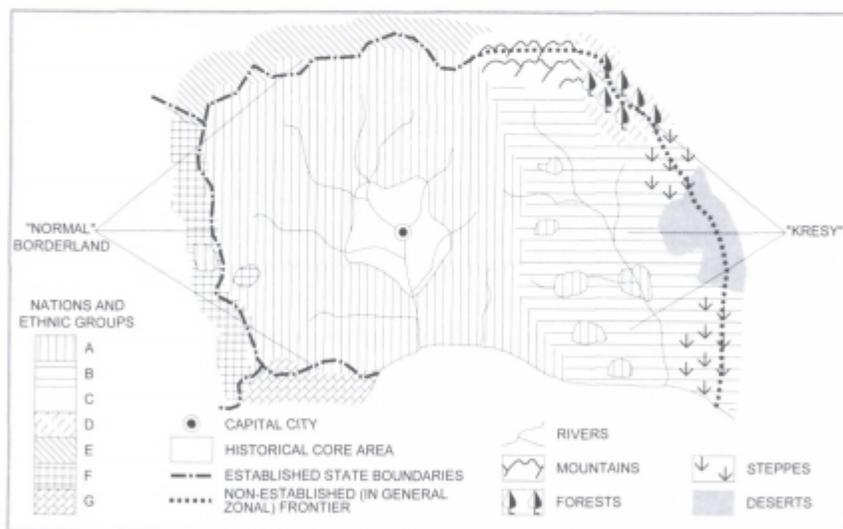
From a politico-geographical point of view the Wild West was a no-man's-land between two expanding national ecumenes of the United States and Mexico. Both states ignored the indigenous, partly nomadic Indian tribes, relatively numerous but deprived of political organization. The encroachment of the most dynamic elements from American and Mexican national cores upon the no-man's-land inevitably led to conflicts with its native inhabitants and also between the two states. Eventually a war broke out, the result of which in 1848 the United States took over the whole Wild West.

A particularity of this kresy was its multiculturalism. The autochthonous Indian ethnicity mingled with extraneous elements of Hispanic, Metizo and European origin. Furthermore, subsequent waves of Chinese, African and Japanese migrants as well as other smaller minorities additionally complicated the ethnic and racial composition of the American western frontier. This area was also peculiar for its legislation. For a long time the Wild West was under

the unwritten 'rule of the prairie' defined by pioneers themselves. In some areas the settlers established their own ephemeral states, for example in Texas and California. After their incorporation to the United States, these areas had the status of 'territory' which was conceived as a temporary status before they became official states. American frontier became world-famous owing to the ethos of Wild West conquerors: trappers, farmers, cowboys, gold-diggers, soldiers as well vagabonds, adventurers, villains and rustlers.

The above overview shows that Polish Kresy was not a unique and rare phenomenon. To the contrary, it is a universal phenomenon to be found in different parts of the world. Therefore we can attempt to compile the general characteristics of kresy. Some features are shown graphically in Figure 3 with the remainder described below.

Figure 3. Morphological Scheme of the State Possessing "Kresy"



Distinguishing Characteristics of Kresy

Geographical Distinctness.

Kresy usually arise in areas geographically different from the state core area. It has a less favourable topography, harsh climate and wilderness.

Peripheral Situation.

Kresy is peripheral not only geographically in relation to the core area, but also in respect to regional hierarchy. It means that kresy is unprivileged in regards to its interrelations with other regions belonging to the effective state area.

Poor Accessibility.

Remoteness of kresy obviously implies its poor accessibility which reduces the possibility of exchanging goods with the developed region and thus deepening its economic retardation.

Isolation.

Due to difficult access, sluggish trade, weak cultural incentives, etc., kresy is likely to remain an economically and culturally isolated land.

Underpopulation.

As a rule kresy is sparsely populated, which inevitably results in diminished activity in the field of economy, politics, culture and social links.

Low Urbanization.

Thinly populated, unstable and economically stagnant territories of kresy offer very unfavourable conditions for the development of an urban network so towns are few and dispersed. The existing towns play the role of trading posts at the beginning of trade routes, forts, administration centres, missions, bishop's seats, communication nodes, market towns, etc. In brief, they centre around typical functions of frontier outposts.

Underdevelopment and Retardation.

Like all outlands, kresy are susceptible to economic, social, cultural, and political underdevelopment. In addition it is often aggravated by exploitation in different ways by the Centre.

Dependence and Subordination.

Peripheries are usually politically subjugated to the Centre. Most important posts are occupied by outside people imposed by central authorities. Local inhabitants are hardly appointed to higher offices unless they belong to the dominant nation or became totally assimilated.

Multiculturalism.

Most often kresy are inhabited by several ethnic groups that may differ in race, language, religion and status. They form a mix of indigenous and alloch-

thonous people of different origin. Unconscious of their national affiliation, they often label themselves 'the locals' and what distinguishes them from the dominant society is their religion, tradition and local ways.

The members of the state-making nation are concentrated mainly in towns–enclaves of alien population surrounded by native peoples. For military and political reasons the central authorities stimulated the settlement of colonists–farmers and service men – coming from the overpopulated core area.

The mosaic society of kresy was ill-disposed toward assimilation into the dominant society. These people were rather susceptible to internal cultural convergence resulting in a specific 'frontier culture' and also a distinct dialect combining local and foreign linguistic elements. Such a process could lay the foundations for development of separate national consciousness and, eventually, secessionist tendencies.

Retardation of Civilization.

The political, social and economic inferiority of frontiers, combined with conservative and distrustful attitudes of the natives who object to the adaptation of traditional forms to the framework of modern life, leads to the self-isolation of such regions from the civilization. Scientific and technological advances have always been delayed in coming to kresy.

Distinct Behaviour Patterns.

Frontier people vary in their behaviour from the population of the effective state area. Moreover, the behaviour of the native inhabitants is unlike that of the aliens. The former generally assume a passive attitude and give up. Nevertheless, they remain ready to defend their identity and avenge wrongs and injuries inflicted by 'strangers'. The latter maintain the pioneer attitudes characterized by the cult of power, self-dependence, resourcefulness, and a superiority complex towards the natives .

Social and Political Instability.

Kresy is an extensive and vague border zone conquered by a nation state. Usually it is a debatable ground claimed by two or more adjacent countries. Its political affiliation is not confirmed by international treaties so it is subject to more or less violent usurpations. As an open area poorly prepared for defence, kresy is a tempting prey for neighbouring states, tribes or bandits. Therefore wars, violence, unrest and territorial changes are inherent elements of the frontier life.

On top of this there are frequent clashes and disturbances between different ethnic, religious and racial groups. Some of these conflicts, often fierce and bloody, are instigated by neighbouring states seeking to destabilize their rival. In some cases the conflicts turn into insurrections aimed for autonomy or sovereignty for the native population. Lack of efficient state control favours banditism.

Peculiarity of Jurisdiction.

Kresy, especially newly incorporated, lacks an efficient legal system. Initially, it is a lawless land under the rule of the jungle. As the state control consolidates the »fist law« is replaced by a more institutionalized »borderland law« established by the military governor. Kresy often has a special legal and political status securing a certain autonomy in the field of culture, and sometimes also in economy and politics.

Frontier Spirit.

One of the most distinctive features of kresy is the romantic ethos associated with the frontier people. The fact is that the conquerors of new frontiers are thought of as incarnating some specific qualities such as courage, rashness, power, enterprise and patriotism which make up the frontier spirit. They are enveloped in an aura of heroism, grandeur and victory as 'missionaries' bringing the civilization to savage lands. Idealized heroes with a nimbus of glory, they have always been an inspiration for countless novels and movies.

Conclusion

Polish Kresy disappeared two hundred years ago although they have remained a part of our romantic history, similar to like the Wild West in America. In other countries, however, kresy still exist. And the question arises what will be the future of the Russian Kresy in Caucasus and Siberia, Chinese kresy in Tibet and Xingjang, Turkish and Iraqi in Kurdistan, Sudanese in the Black South or another scale of the European kresy in the Balkan Peninsula. This aspect of Kresy should be a subject of further studies.

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"Kresy" kot poseben tip obmejnega območja – poreklo pojma in njegove političnogeografske razsežnosti

Povzetek

V 14. stoletju se je v okviru poljsko-litvanskega kraljestva oblikoval pojem »kresy«, ki je označeval obsežno, oddaljeno, multikulturno in nestabilno obmejno regijo. Lahko bi ji pripisali tudi pridevnike kot so periferija, mejno ozemlje oziroma pojem in prostor enačili z našim »na konfini«. Taka območja najdemo v zgodovinskem pregledu in v realnosti sodobnega sveta še mnogokje. Označujejo jih obmejna lega, ekstremna oddaljenost od središča države oziroma težka, dolgotrajna dostopnost ter tamkajšnje družbeno in politično geografsko specifične razmere. Vsem obmejnim območjem ne moremo pripisati tega pojma. Obmejna območja, kot jih poznamo in tradicionalno poimenujemo v politični geografiji, so ponavadi stične točke dveh ekumen politično opredeljenih narodov. Njuna suverenost se dokazuje v okviru lastnih nacionalnih držav. Taka obmejna območja so praviloma dvojezična, naroda med seboj komunicirata, bilingvizem je vsakdanjost, pogosto se oba naroda stapljata v kulturnem in socialnem izrazu. Po drugi plati pa pojem »kresy« opredeljuje območje, ki je daleč v stran od nukleusa naroda in države; vanjo je bilo to območje vključeno z osvajanji, plemiškim dedovanjem, osebnostnimi zvezami in

poplačili ter nenazadnje izključno političnimi odločitvami. Ponavadi gre za izrazito večkulturni prostor, ki izkazuje svojo komplicirano nprav v etničnem, političnem in socialnem položaju. Pričujoči prispevek poskuša pojmi »kresy« pripisati širši globalni značaj. Želi odkriti sorodna območja izven poljskega jezikovnega kroga in jih ustrezno opredeliti.

Angleški besedi »bordeland« in »frontier« zajemata, v navezavi druga na drugo, dokaj dobro tudi vsebino poljske besede »kresy«. Morda bi celo ruski besedi »rubiež« lahko pripisali sorodne vsebine. V Ameriki in Rusiji se pripisuje tem pojmom prednostno značaj »pionirstva« - odkritij in osvajanj: v takih območjih se udejanjajo specifični zakoni mejašev, njihov romantični etos se prenaša iz roda v rod s pripovedovanjem in zapisi. Na Poljskem je podobnosti najti v območjih, ki so nekdanj »varovala« zahodno krščanstvo. Z ameriškim terminom »Divji zahod« (ki označuje tako ozemlje kot način življenja) lahko enačimo poslanstvo na teh (nekdanj) poljskih območjih. Pravzaprav mnoge države sveta v okviru lastnih meja vključujejo ali so vključevala podobna geografsko, politično, ekonomsko in kulturno specifična ozemlja. To so bila območja na Balkanu v obdobju Otomanskega carstva, to sta bili Slovaška in Hrvaška v okrilju madžarskega kraljestva, to so bila tudi območja v Sibiriji, na Kavkazu in v Osrednji Aziji v obdobju ruskega imperija. Pogosto primerjamo oziroma enačimo razmere v kitajskih provincah Tibet in Ksinkjang, na območju turškega Kurdistan in ozemlje Amazonije v Braziliji s tistimi vsebinami, ki jih opredeljuje poljski pojem »kresy«.